

*Ten Short Poems
from the
Last Millennium*

by Stuart Heath

One.

The rhythm of the world beats on my base ear drum
and I can grow another tongue
and season it with ice and salt, with alcohol and blood,
and I can join the siren's song
by drab canals where once, barefoot, the siren stood
and seal my ears with grease and soot
to hear the three/four beating of that beautiful black pump
I call my heart.

Two.

For sale at mermaid's market there
were scimitars, chronometers,
lifebelts, sextants, bells... to bargain for
these trinkets from her basement was

a pleasure. The statue-garden,
windswept on the poop-deck, where we
smoked, and spoke of melancholy days—
it was glazed with wintry splendour

and was ours for a while we
might have bartered for a pearl from
her cold bracelet, hours later.

Frost-embellished fantasies: cheap
to rent, impossible to purchase
from a mermaid's merchant barge.

Three.

The friend of freedom stands friendless today:
the crowds have dispersed, the market is shut;
the silence the drummers' and beggars',
the buskers' and pedlars' departures have left

is almost complete. Fine rain swirls down in
mournful waves—how the friend of freedom's bronze
limbs ache! A bachelor once, he spied from
his plinth the cotton-cupped breasts of the girls

that passed. A widower now, he relates
to the gulls the beginning, middle
and end of his static, metallic tale:
“How lonely it is, to be freedom's friend.”

Four.

Drunk on constant darkness,
I waded through waves of hail
in search of six AM.

A ghostly signal, I am
from time to time drowned
in fresh outbursts of noise

from the electromagnetic
whirlpool we dream about,
in queasy revolution.

The silence craved by the
storm's heart I re-create
in colours cold and rare

as liquid helium.

Five.

Cut in half by still water,
my days depend on a small

stone bridge. The iron sun sets
and rises on my right hand.

In the black water, black fish
are heard swimming. Days

outnumber nights by three to one.

Six.

The channel's cool waters
are smooth like a mirror,
black as the night.

A door in a doorframe
floats like an ice-sheet:
motionless, white.

The West Canal siren
lives with her lover
under that mute,

flat threshold. Her silence
this Winter is silver:
an unplayed flute.

Seven.

Once there was a man who wasn't happy.
He went into the woods and found a smile:
under his pillow it went.

When he wasn't happy, the man enjoyed
conjuring emptiness from fullness—he
specialized in bottles of wine.

Unhappiness fits me like a well-tailored
suit, the conjurer cried, pointing to his
handkerchief, umbrella, briefcase, hat and gloves.

His smile was conjured away in blankets of smoke...
And now that his hat has a hole, that lets in rain,
he'll not get it back again.

Eight.

Perhaps on certain nights: colder,
still, darker than most, light might
be glimpsed in the depths of sleep,

in the quietest part of a dream,
when a lamp is held out by a
hand that may be taken.

And the dreamer would shake, but could
not wake until the lamp's bright flame
dies down, and words are spoken.

Nine.

I threw a coin at the mirroe,
a silver coin.
My reflection caught it:
caught it and flipped it up,
spinning.
I watched it land on the back
of his hand.
'Heads or Tails?'
is what my reflection asked.

Ten.

Instead of mirrors,
eyes,
that both reflect,
and are reflected in
my own.

Cardiff, Bristol, Rome,
1993-6.